

Dilemmas of the Modern Fiction Writer

It seems to me that the greatest dilemma facing the contemporary fiction writer is the question of form. Our negotiation of form expresses our relationship with reality. If we continue to write a seamless narrative, untroubled by authorial scruple or perspectival query, then we are saying that the great tradition was never fractured, and that the discoveries and achievements of modernism in the arts were nothing but a side road, which can once more be safely ignored as we press on down the highway.

The Revolution

And yet there was a revolution back there, and I cannot myself see how any serious writer can afford to act as though it never occurred. Let us try to recapitulate briefly.

With a few notable exceptions, there have usually been three traditional ways to voice fiction: the first person, the third person, and the free indirect. I can speak as the person in the middle of the story, with all the implications of intimacy and limitation which that implies. 'Call me Ishmael,' Melville's protagonist tells us at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, and we walk straight into his world. Mark Twain invented this tone of demotic urgency and partisan comradeship. The opposite voicing is that of the omniscient author, the third person with no limitation placed upon knowledge, since the God-like stance permits us to peer into all situations. Thus do we receive the legendary opening of *Pride and Prejudice*: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' Who is speaking? Jane Austen, except that she does not have a name, and is not required to present us with any

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credentials. She knows everything; we agree to take that on trust.

The free indirect permits us to move between the omniscient narrator and the inner consciousness of the characters by shifting imperceptibly into the mind of one or other of the characters within the work. Jane Austen herself uses it. Most novelists use it to some degree. Without having to put the matter in inverted commas, we let the words on the page become those of the character herself rather than those of the omniscient author. Then along came James Joyce. Joyce radicalized the free indirect style to a remarkable degree. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he disrupted all previous expectations about this voicing. Not only do we feel a moral and psychological shift, as we enter a character's consciousness; we now feel a fundamental linguistic shift too. The vocabulary and syntax, the whole linguistic world, move us with a jolt to an alternative centre of consciousness. Joyce first tried to write his *Bildungsroman* in standard form, surrounded by that all-encompassing narrative voice which we always hear in Jane Austen, and which critics sometimes refer to as the meta-narrative. That was *Stephen Hero*, a work which he abandoned. When he came back to the same subject to try again, he divided up his protagonist's development into five chapters, and the language of each of them shifts vertiginously. We sense from the articulation of the words that this is one mind and one life, but that it is changing at considerable speed, and as it changes the linguistic world it inhabits changes too.

The first glimpse we catch of Stephen is as an infant and he lives inside an infant's vocabulary and syntax: 'His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.' Colon follows colon; parataxis follows parataxis. Short declarative statements succeed one another, without subordinate clauses, since young children

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think and speak declaratively. By the fifth stage of the book we hear the undergraduate Stephen uttering himself forth thus: 'The most satisfying relations of the sensible must therefore correspond to the necessary phases of artistic apprehension.' Never are we given a word of explanation as to how we move from one Stephen to another. The language itself provides the map. We must deduce from the language where we are situated in Stephen's life at any one time.

Fragmentation

And this radical style of situating us within the language of the narrator, rather than providing a meta-narrative which does the situating for us, is accompanied by the cinematic cut, which is an acknowledgment of the fragmentation of the overall narrative. The reason modernism was seen to be so potent was because such a deliberated fragmentation within the work corresponded to a fragmentation in reality itself. Modernity brought with it speed, unprecedented communication, urbanization and fragmentation. It is both chastening and exhilarating to consider that ours is the first civilization on earth to have a speed as its absolute. How can we join up the bits and pieces of such an accelerating world? Perhaps we can't. In which case the writing itself must not provide any phoney glue, in the form of a seamless narrative which ignores, rather than resolves, the fissiparous quality of modern experience.

Dickens in *Great Expectations* takes us back with unparalleled vividness to that moment in the graveyard when Pip is confronted by Magwitch. Yet, no matter how convincingly we are plunged into the horror of the experience, we are still surrounded by the possibility of a narrative voice which can situate and distance that experience, for the older Pip is ever-present, even if

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silently, with his calm and dispassionate vocabulary and voicing. We are never left entirely in Pip's mind, as this passage demonstrates:

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

The structure of that last sentence is not a child's: the two semicolons alert us to a sophisticated syntax and grammar.

In Joyce's *A Portrait* the all-surrounding voice of the narrator is gone, which means that fragmentation and the cinematic cut are now inevitable. How else to take us from one stage to another? There is no voice outside the voices to provide an explanation. Fiction writers since have been forced to make a choice. Either revert to the Jane Austen position, or acknowledge in some way the modernist revolution. In what way must the form of fiction acknowledge the intellectual nature of the reality in which we find ourselves? Can it simply ignore it, and get on with telling a good story? Most popular writers have chosen the latter option. Reality never was fractured, or if it was, only a tiny group of intellectuals ever noticed the break anyway. So carry on as before. Yet some of the most intriguing and compelling modern writers do acknowledge the break, and find ways of writing through it, rather than simply taking a seamless detour.

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A Few Examples of Contemporary Fragmentation

Eliot registered the significance of Joyce's manoeuvre when he reviewed *Ulysses* and said that Joyce had found a way of imposing order on the great chaos of modern life and experience, by employing the Homeric parallel. The fragmentation of modern life and modern experience meant that if an overall resolving order was to be found at all, it would have to be imported from elsewhere; previous forms of art, for example, such as the Homeric epic. The interior monologue that Joyce introduced in this book found its formal control in a narrative pattern from two and a half millennia before.

Picasso seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion visually when he began to employ the expressive, non-realist, effect of primitive masks in painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. The abolition of chronology and the embrace of primitive form allow modern life to be fashioned into intelligible shapes, for how can we find anything but unrelated detail in a world of infinite fragmentation?

Michael Ondaatje is an example of a writer who, in his finest work, does not try to escape fragmentation but embraces it as one of his resources. In *Coming Through Slaughter* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*,¹ there is no narrative, or at least certainly no single narrative. Different voices, different sources, give their evidence. Spaces are left between them. The white space on the page is one of the most important devices of the modern writer. The whole of *The Waste Land* is punctuated by gaps which are not to be filled by explanation or setting. The gaps announce a change of voice, and we must then deduce

¹ Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976; London: Bloomsbury, 2004); *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970; London: Bloomsbury, 2004).

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from the internal evidence of the next speaker exactly where we are and who is involved. The technique is that of the mosaic. Fragments are brought together and begin to form a shape which is somehow bigger than all the fragments put together. Ondaatje is one of the most skilful deployers of the mosaic technique in modern fiction. He allows for a plurality of voices on the page, and does not put them into any hierarchy of significance by employing a meta-narrative. We as readers are left to glean who is speaking and where. We are situated amongst those 'plurabilities' Joyce spoke of in *Finnegans Wake*.

Janna Levin, in *A Madman Dreams of Turing Machines*² is not as radical in her technique as the Ondaatje of *Coming Through Slaughter*, but she lets us know that she is not Jane Austen. She recreates the lives of Alan Turing and Kurt Gödel, both brilliant scientists, both profoundly troubled, and both fixated on a poisoned apple. But she shows her hand, rather than trying to conceal it: 'Here I am, in New York City. It is the twenty-first century. This place is as good a place, this time as good a time, as any.' The author acknowledges her authorship, without in any way diminishing the vividness of the lives that are her subject.

Jill Dawson in her brilliant novel *Wild Boy*³ acknowledges the clash of discursive voices and the clash of memories, without prioritizing one above another. We witness a collision of worlds. Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron, becomes a stage the adults march back and forth across. Can he be inserted into the world of language, having spent his early years outside language? In the years after the French Revolution this becomes a question not merely of one little boy and his needs, but of the validity of

² Janna Levin, *A Madman Dreams of Turing Machines* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007).

³ Jill Dawson, *Wild Boy* (London: Sceptre, 2003).

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the thought of the Enlightenment. Once again the gaps on the page, the white spaces, announce a new voicing. We are never informed that a new person will be speaking. We must deduce it ourselves. *Wild Boy* is a triumphant example of how a contemporary writer can acknowledge the achievements of modernism, and make use of them, without jettisoning all the benefits of a traditional historical narrative.

Elaine Feinstein adopts a different strategy. In her novel *The Russian Jerusalem*⁴ the character starts in the present and is led into the past by the poet Marina Tsvetaeva. They travel back together to the time of the Stalinist purges, and meet Pasternak, Mandelstam and Isaac Babel. Tsvetaeva is Virgil to Feinstein's Dante, another superb example of how the modern writer turns to the past to find forms which make our present realities expressible. The journey to the Underworld becomes a way of approaching contemporary experience.

A different path altogether was pursued by those writers who have come to be known as magic realists. Theirs is a different technique: they let the light of the fantastic, the light of myth and legend, fall upon the seamless narrative and highlight the marvellous strands within it. By this means the homogeneous and rational world of the novel is disrupted and subverted from within. As their name implies, they are committed to a form of realism, but it is one which includes much of what this seemingly rational form would previously have excluded: the fantastic, the uncanny, the preternatural. The ghost story has collided with the realist narrative, and what spills out is a scene from Hieronymous Bosch.

Marquez acknowledges that this technique, this intellectual world even, began with Borges, whose stories

⁴ Elaine Feinstein, *The Russian Jerusalem* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008).

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(for he never wrote a novel) problematize reality, and make us ask how we can ever accept any narrative as other than constructed. The deliberately traditional prose, often with footnotes and a bibliographic apparatus, or interrupted by deadpan scholarly digressions, is employed to undermine the reality for which it provides so many credentials and exemplars. This process began much earlier, with the great works of the eighteenth century, to which Borges was much devoted.⁵ All reality has become a constructed narrative. We are now in a world in which Lawrence's famous injunction 'Never trust the teller; trust the tale' is cancelled out by Nietzsche's equally peremptory 'There are no philosophies; only philosophers'. Human identity often seems to be absorbed by the narrative it had assumed it was commanding. The tale swallows the teller, and goes in search of other tongues. We start to approach what philosophers call 'infinite irony', where the ironic effect has no unironic certainty underpinning it. Each ironic distance simply seems to open up another, larger one.

In 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', perhaps his greatest story, Borges imagines the creation of a land, a language, a history, a world. A phenomenally rich man effectively decides to reinvent reality, to reconstruct the world according to the dictates of a set of idealist principles. A single copy of the entry on the invented land, Uqbar, is then inserted into the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Further data about the place and its philosophy will be forthcoming when a curious Englishman dies. Little by little we are given sufficient data to reconstruct the world they had constructed between them. The intellectual gymnastics are all put to a serious purpose. Borges would appear to have

⁵ See the discussion of Pope and Swift in 'Creative and Destructive Writing' below.

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written the story in 1940-1941, when a substantial part of Europe was engaged in rewriting reality so that it might fulfil the expectations of a particular ideology. Such fundamental disrespect towards reality is simultaneously beguiling and extremely dangerous. We begin to be horrified by it. The arcane story with its tangled bibliographical details becomes a political parable.⁶

Fictional form must be open enough to let contemporary reality in. If it closes itself entirely in a seamless narrative, with no possibility of fracture, then it refuses to acknowledge the great changes that have happened to our world, including the intellectual ones. In the inter-relationship between form and voicing, the writer places himself intellectually inside contemporary reality.

⁶ One that is brilliantly analysed by Gabriel Josipovici in his essay 'The Plain Sense of Things', in *The Singer on the Shore* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006).